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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000650

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM MOPS EAID CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DAS FEIGENBAUM CONFRONTS GSL'S
"MILITARY BEFORE POLITICAL" STRATEGY

REF: A. COLOMBO 637
B. COLOMBO 578

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a series of June 30 meetings with GSL officials, SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum stressed that Sri Lanka has many friends in Washington, but a growing sense of frustration, even despair, now prevails that the political track has not kept up with the military track in the government's efforts to bring lasting stability to the country. He urged the government to address human rights concerns, focusing on the release of child soldiers in the East and the prevention of future recruitment as key short-term goals to help set the bilateral relationship on a more positive trajectory. GSL officials expressed optimism about further releases of child soldiers by the TMVP. Feigenbaum encouraged implementation of the 13th amendment and a reinvigorated All Party Representative Conference process; he stressed the need for a devolution plan credible to the Tamil community. But the GSL remains committed to its current strategy to defeat the LTTE militarily. On July 1, DAS Feigenbaum and Charge attended the opening of the \$10 million USAID-funded bridge in Arugam Bay where they spoke separately with President Rajapaksa and Eastern Chief Minister Pillaiyan (septel). End Summary

UNICEF Readies For Joint Verification
Teams and Urges Continued US Pressure
on the Issue of Child Soldiers

¶2. (C) In a meeting at UNICEF's offices, Country Chief Philippe Duamelle noted UNICEF's close working relationship his office has with the embassy. Duamelle emphasized that the GSL was moving on the issue because of the political leverage being exerted by the U.S. is essential in pushing the Government to address the issue of child soldiers. He cautioned that the situation remains fragile; if the U.S. removes pressure on the government before an effective system was in place to prevent future child recruitment, any progress on releases could easily be reversed.

¶3. (C) Duamelle outlined to Feigenbaum the three step process that UNICEF and GSL officials had agreed to at a June 10 dinner (ref B). The first part of the agreement was the establishment of joint UNICEF-GSL verification teams that would work to release the seventy-four children currently in UNICEF's files. In preparation for this joint verification, UNICEF contacted each of the families that reported their children missing and sought permission to disclose the children's names to the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Human Rights officials who will work with UNICEF. UNICEF Child Protection Chief Andy Brooks reported that the overwhelming majority of families had agreed; Brooks said he knew of only two cases where permission was not granted. Brooks said there is a perception in the East that because of LTTE infiltration, fighting is likely to return in the near future. As a result, these families are taking added risks, such as disclosing the names to the GSL despite fears of reprisals and re-recruitment, to try and ensure their children are not forced to participate in renewed combat. Duamelle recounted his recent trip to Ampara where he saw children openly carrying weapons outside TMVP offices and described a "climate of fear" on the part of the public. In a separate lunch, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Samarasinghe stated that he looked forward to working with UNICEF and hoped that once the children were released they would be provided vocational training and psychological counseling to help them re-integrate into society. He reported that the Secretary of his ministry had just returned from a trip to Batticaloa and believed that another release of children is imminent.

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¶4. (C) In a meeting with Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Feigenbaum pressed Rajapaksa to help the United States tell not just a "good" story but a "credible" one to Capitol Hill about progress in the East, in particular in the area of child soldiers; this is necessary if the two governments are to overcome the sense of despair and frustration many friends of Sri Lanka in Washington feel about the current trajectory of the conflict. Gotabaya offered a different characterization, explaining that the GSL had successfully brought Eastern Province Chief Minister Sivanesathurai Chadrakanthan, alias Pillaiyan, and the TMVP into the political process. Instead of criticizing the government, he said, the international community should support GSL efforts to transform former terrorists into mainstream political actors. The Defense Secretary urged DAS Feigenbaum to understand that the integration of the TMVP would be a sustained process which should not be judged too quickly or harshly. Rajapaksa underlined continuing difficulties entreatting Pillaiyan to disarm, as Pillaiyan remains concerned that TMVP disarmament would encourage LTTE re-infiltration of the East. DAS Feigenbaum praised the earlier releases of thirty nine children by the TMVP, but stated that with the TMVP now administering the government of the Eastern province, no longer simply an armed movement, the GSL has taken on the burden and responsibility for ensuring all child soldiers are released. What is needed, he added, is not just further releases but a mechanism to foreclose re-recruitment and sustain the momentum.

GSL Officials Confident
In Their Military Strategy

¶5. (C) Feigenbaum highlighted for GSL officials international USG concern over the growing human rights problems in Sri Lanka and the apparent lack of any concerted political effort to address Tamil grievances in a credible way. Defense Secretary Rajapaksa rejected this message outright, saying that the Pentagon understands the government's problems while the State Department fails to grasp that Sri Lanka is dealing with a brutal terrorist organization that does not play by accepted rules. Pointing at the Defense Attach, Feigenbaum

replied that State and DOD assessed the situation in Sri Lanka "very similarly" and his message on both human rights and child soldiers was the USG's, not State's. He noted USG support for Sri Lanka's fight against the LTTE, including the Foreign Terrorist Organization designation and a recent FBI sting operation. Rajapaksa argued that the security forces are "much improved" compared to where they were in the 1980s, and that human rights abuses were merely a byproduct of terrorism. He added that while all Tamils are not terrorists, almost all terrorists are Tamils, making it necessary for the security forces to use ethnic profiling as they conduct operations. (Note: Ref A documents a recent case of such profiling. End note.) Rajapakse also argued that disappearances have been going on for thirty years and were not going to stop overnight. He rejected negotiations with the LTTE, saying that after every ceasefire agreement the LTTE only emerged with more arms and pursued more killing and more destruction. He stated flatly that there would be no peace in the country until the LTTE had been militarily defeated.

¶16. (C) In a separate meeting, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Bhaila described the Eastern Provincial Council elections as a "victory for democracy" and said the GSL's commitment to develop the North and the East was so significant that "other provinces are complaining." Foreign Secretary Kohona questioned a federal solution saying it would not address the problems of the 54% of the Tamil community living outside of the North and East.

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UNP and TNA Blast Government

¶17. (C) Opposition Leader and United National Party head Ranil Wickrimesinghe previewed for Feigenbaum a series of agitation actions the UNP plans to use to rally its supporters in the run up to August's two provincial council elections. He accused President Rajapaksa of turning Sri Lanka into the "Zimbabwe of Asia," and pushed the U.S. to avoid legitimizing the government's strategy in the East with development funding. He argued that all Muslims and some Tamils are still bitter about Pillaiyan becoming the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province and would react negatively if Feigenbaum and Charge were seen with him in any circumstances. Feigenbaum responded that his presence at the opening of the Arugam Bay bridge the following day, where President Rajapaksa and Pillaiyan would both be present, was non-political and was appropriate because USAID had provided the funding for the bridge, the USG's largest post-tsunami project in Sri Lanka. Wickrimesinghe thanked the USG for continuing to speak out publicly on human rights. In a separate meeting, Tamil National Alliance leader Sampanthan detailed the history and inadequacies of the 13th Amendment and criticized the Supreme Court decision ratifying the de-merger of the Eastern Province from the north. He described President Rajapaksa as a "Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist" who is only focused on the war as a means to secure a second term.

Education Top Priority To
Combat Trafficking In Persons

¶18. (C) In a meeting with Minister for Foreign Employment Keheliya Rambukwella, DAS Feigenbaum emphasized the importance of GSL action to address trafficking in persons (TIP) and to hold TIP offenders accountable, not least through convictions in courts of law. Rambukwella promised to provide reports to Post on summaries of convictions for those involved in trafficking in persons but said that education was the number one focus of the government to combat the problem. Rambukwella also stressed that the scale

of the problem in Sri Lanka is not at alarming levels.

President Rajapaksa Brushes
Off Human Rights Issues

¶9. (C) On July 1, Feigenbaum and Charge attended the opening of the \$10 million USAID-funded bridge in Arugam Bay, the single biggest US tsunami relief project in the country. The President turned the event into a televised pep-talk on his strategy for the East; he added several GSL ministers to the program even as the opening ceremony was already in progress, leaving Charge as the only USG speaker and bumping both the USAID Country Director and DAS Feigenbaum from the program in midstream. In his public comments, the President thanked the United States for the bridge but principally delivered an upbeat message to the nation about the East. Sri Lankan state and other media gave prominent coverage to USAID's role. In separate, but parallel, private conversations, the Charge and DAS Feigenbaum stressed to the President the need for the TMVP to disarm as it enters the political process and for it to release all child soldiers in its ranks. The President replied that "child soldiers have already been taken care of" but told DAS Feigenbaum he understood the issue. Rajapaksa said that he was ready to fully implement the 13th Amendment in the East but without devolving police powers.

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COMMENT: GSL Strategy Not Inconsistent
With Progress On Child Soldiers

¶10. (C) Feigenbaum's visit highlighted the government's continued commitment to its current military strategy for resolving the conflict, despite international criticism over abductions, media harassment and the lack of a political strategy to address Tamil grievances. However, despite the President's claim that the issue had been taken care of, others in the GSL are working with us to continue movement on child soldiers. If Minister Samarasinghe is correct and another release of child soldiers is imminent, it would be a welcome step that would provide momentum for the establishment of a system of "effective measures" that could halt future recruitment of children. End Comment.

¶11. (U) DAS Feigenbaum has cleared this message.
BLAKE